

How obelisks became Roman

Jaś Elsner

Obelisks are among the most distinctive marks of the layout of the city in modern Rome. In the glory years of the Renaissance and the Baroque, popes used them to adorn squares (like the courtyard in front of St Peter's, for example), parks (such as that on the Pincian Hill) and fountains (like the one made by Bernini in the Piazza Navona). Their widespread existence in early-modern Rome was to lead to a great fashion of nineteenth-century obelisk-erection in the major cities of imperial powers, notably in England, France and the USA. But in fact these acts of relatively recent decoration are themselves homages to the great imperial fashion for obelisks and their decorative uses in ancient Rome.

As early as 10 B.C., Augustus brought two obelisks from Heliopolis (the city at the point where the Nile divides), to celebrate his conquest of Egypt. The smaller, a monument of Psammetichus II from the 26th dynasty (sixth and fifth centuries B.C.), became the sun dial of the emperor's great *horologium*, a monumental sun-clock laid out with bronze strips in travertine paving in the Campus Martius, near the Ara Pacis ('altar of peace') and Mausoleum (Augustus' burial chamber). The second, an obelisk of Rameses II, was set up in the *spina* (or central division) of the Circus Maximus, where the Romans held their chariot races. When later Roman artists wanted to indicate the circus in all kinds of works of art, they did so by including an image of the obelisk.

Indeed the association of obelisks with circuses would come to inspire the choices of future emperors for the site of their obelisks: the Hippodrome of Constantinople is a good example. Augustus' Circus Maximus obelisk was to be joined by a huge obelisk from Karnak, originally intended for Constantinople but given to Rome by the emperor Constantius to celebrate his Roman triumph of A.D. 357. Both were discovered in the Circus Maximus in the sixteenth century and unearthed by order of Pope Sixtus V in 1587. The Augustan obelisk was erected in the Piazza del Popolo (outside Sixtus' own church of Sta Maria del Popolo), while Constantius' gift to Rome – the largest of all surviving obelisks – was set up in front of the oldest of all Rome's imperial churches, the Lateran Basilica.

The centrality of obelisks to the ancient Roman imagination can be grasped not only by considering their proliferation in Rome (numerous emperors, from Caligula in the first century A.D. to Theodosius in the fourth century, imported obelisks), but also by looking to Pliny's account of what he calls 'these monoliths of Aswan granite' in his encyclopedia, the *Natural History*. Pliny offers a lengthy discussion of the difficulties of transportation and especially of making ships for the purpose of carrying obelisks, which he describes as attracting 'much attention from sightseers'.

We can tell something of the great effort involved in erecting obelisks from the sculptures which were made to adorn the marble base of the great obelisk from Karnak set up by Theodosius I in the Hippodrome of the imperial capital, Constantinople, where the Roman empire was now based, in about 390 A.D. The base boasts two reliefs, one showing chariot races within the Hippodrome (adorned by two obelisks) and the other showing the great venture of raising the obelisk on to its base. The impression of effort is reinforced by the inscriptions on the other sides of the base, of which one announces (in Greek):

The emperor Theodosius is the only one to succeed in raising the four-sided column, which had lain on the

ground forever. He called on Proclus; and the column stood in two and thirty days.

The second, this time with the obelisk itself doing the talking, says (in Latin):

Formerly reluctant, I was ordered to obey the serene lords and carry the palm of the extinct tyrants. Everything yields to Theodosius and his everlasting offspring. So conquered and vanquished, I was raised to the lofty sky in three times ten days, while Proclus was judge.

Allowing for the usual exaggerated language of praise associated with the court, both inscriptions imply how hard and complicated it was, and stress how great the emperors were in putting the obelisk up. The complexities lay not only in the weight of obelisks and the risks of damaging their exquisite hieroglyphic decorations if incompetently handled, but also in their delicate fragility.

An obelisk for Antinous

Of the surviving obelisks in Rome, one of the most intriguing is the very last to have been made, possibly in Roman-ruled Egypt itself or possibly even in Rome, during the reign of Hadrian (117–38 A.D.). This is the obelisk now in the gardens on the Pincio, which was made to commemorate the death of Hadrian's favourite, Antinous, and to celebrate his elevation into divinity. Antinous, the emperor's distinctively beautiful boyfriend from Bithynia, died in dubious circumstances in Egypt in 130 A.D. aged about 20, probably by drowning in the Nile.

The emperor's mourning led to not only the foundation of a whole new Greek city in Egypt, Antinoopolis (or Antinoe), and the consecration of his beloved as a god, but also the production of numerous marble statues (nearly 100 survive, some perhaps from after Hadrian's reign). Many of these images depict Antinous in the form of various Greco-Roman deities (Apollo, Bacchus, Silvanus). But others – especially several statues of Antinous from Hadrian's great villa outside Rome at Tivoli – showed him in Egyptian garb, as a god or Pharaoh.

The obelisk is Hadrian's most magnificent monument in the Egyptian style, with its Egyptian hieroglyphs cut in a rather free Roman elaboration of traditional patterns and its inscriptional texts apparently translated from a Greek original. These include a prayer to the sun-god Har-achte (Ra) by the newly deified Antinous, now associated with the Egyptian god Osiris (who rose from the dead as Osirantinous, an amalgamation of Osiris and Antinous). The prayer specifically asks for blessings for both Hadrian (beloved 'of the Nile and of the gods, the Lord of Diadems, who lives, is safe and healthy, who lives forever in a fresh, beautiful, youthful age, while he is possessor of fortune, the ruler of every country...'), and his wife, Sabina ('the great royal lady, beloved of him, the queen of both countries, Sabina, who lives, is safe and healthy, Augusta, who lives forever...').

This austere, formal celebration of Hadrian and Sabina (incomprehensible to anyone in Rome who could not read hieroglyphs, but perhaps accompanied by a Greek or Latin translation as a caption) might seem implausible coming from a dead youth whose only claim to fame was to have been the emperor's boyfriend. But the boy has now become a god; the prayer is accompanied by long lists of his honours and features. Among other details, the inscription describes in detail the

city named after his name [that is to say, Antinoopolis in Egypt] and the troops of Greeks that belong to it ... A temple of the god, who is called Osirantinous the blessed, is found there and is built of good white stone, with sphinxes round it, and statues and numerous columns, such as were made earlier by the ancestors (Egyptians), and such as were made by the Greeks. All gods and goddesses give him the breath of life and he breathes as one rejuvenated.

What the inscription proclaims – which is implied even by the Egyptian form of the Obelisk – is a dramatic union of Roman with other visual and religious styles. Quite apart from its pathos as a memorial to a drowned lover, the obelisk of Antinous gestures to the way in which the obelisk had become a vehicle for thoroughly Roman messages. And so it looks forward to the way that obelisks would come to be seen as typical of Rome in the era of Papal munificence in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Today, we tend to conceive of obelisks as exclusively Egyptian (we might think particularly of ‘Cleopatra’s Needle,’ which was set up on the Embankment in London in 1878). Like numerous other relatively recently re-erected obelisks – for instance, the ‘Cleopatra’s Needle’ put up in Central Park, New York, in 1881 or the obelisk of Rameses II erected in the Place de la Concorde in Paris in 1836 – this belongs in part to the great nineteenth-century enthusiasm for Egypt, known as ‘Egyptomania’. But it is also part of the competition of modern nations – all imperial powers in the nineteenth century with colonial ambitions – to rival Rome, the supreme model for empire. The history of Egypt is closely bound up with the history of Rome’s uses of Egypt.

Jaś Elsner is the author of Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph and is based at Corpus Christi College Oxford.